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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

FRIDAY, December 15, 1933 ★

U. S. Department of Agriculture

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SUBJECT: "ELEVENTH-HOUR GIFTS." Information from the Bureau of Home Economics and the Bureau of Plant Industry.

Maybe you're one of those forehanded people who never lets time creep up unexpectedly and find you unprepared at the eleventh hour. Perhaps you always make your Christmas plans well in advance and then carry them out by shopping early and long before this date, having every gift off in the mails or wrapped and waiting on the closet shelf. Maybe you're one of those wise souls who never gets caught in a last-minute holiday flurry. If so, hats off to you. You deserve and will get peace on earth at Christmas time. But from my observation of the human race, you're rare. Most of us are likely to run into emergencies around Christmas. The day sneaks up before we are half ready. Maybe, a day or so before you wake up all of a sudden and remember that you've forgotten somebody who belongs on your Christmas list. "My, my, here it is Christmas Eve and I haven't a thing for Great Aunt Ida's stocking." Or, "There. I've forgotten to send a little greeting to my neighbor down the street."

Well, don't give up in despair. Put your imagination to work. Let your kitchen or your well-stocked pantry or even your cellar come to the rescue. Practical home gifts are more in style than ever this year.

Right here I might mention two kinds of Christmas presents that have gone out of style decidedly during these economy years. The elaborate expensive gift that almost breaks the budget is out. So is the useless homemade present -- the fancy-work chair cover, the fussy pincushion, the sad-looking and sad-tasting homemade candy, and so on. But the homemade gift that costs little, yet will be useful to the person who receives it--that kind of present is ideal for this year or any other year, suitable as a last-minute inspiration or as a carefully planned gift.

Farm folks really have the advantage over their city cousins on this matter of successful home-made gifts. Farm lands provide so many things that make welcome presents to almost anyone living in the city. Your cellar of stored vegetables and apples; your pantry stocked with your own jams, jellies and pickles---these come to mind first of all as Christmas possibilities. But if you look around, you'll find plenty of other things that will cost you little or nothing and will be a big treat to your friends in town.

On Wednesday when we were talking about good things to make from nuts, we mentioned sending a bag of choice nuts or a box of nut meats to your friends as a Christmas greeting. One very practical friend of mine up in New York State sends bags of potatoes to his friends, with a Christmas tag saying that these are the finest potatoes from his field. Another friend sends baskets of bright delicious apples and sometimes a big green Hubbard squash from her cellar. The children in her family fix up little bags of fresh popcorn for their small city cousins to pop. Or they pack boxes of pine cones to start the Christmas fire.

I know a lady who has a kitchen herb garden that supplies most of her Christmas presents. She dries her own sage, for example, and puts this up in little boxes for Christmas use. She also dries mint leaves for use as seasoning during the winter or to keep in tea canisters to give tea leaves a minty taste.

Most people living in cities will be delighted with a present of fresh greens--evergreen branches to decorate the mantel, or homemade wreaths for the windows, or even tiny living fir trees or holly bushes for the centerpiece at the Christmas table.

If you have some friends who are fond of flowers, why not send them packages of flower seeds or bulbs from your own garden, with a card attached announcing that Santa Claus is thinking of next spring's garden? Speaking of garden gifts, remember how our grandmothers and great-grandmothers used to save lavender flowers and rose leaves to dry and use as sachet for their linen and clothing? Well, these simple and fragrant homemade sachets are still welcome presents for the women of the family. Nice for bureau drawers, chests of clothing, or even the hangers in the clothes closet. Dried straw flowers or flowers of the everlasting plant, dipped in red dye perhaps, make pretty winter or Christmas bouquets. Almost any friend would be delighted with a bouquet of dried bittersweet with its bright orange berries to cheer up a gloomy corner.

Last year a practical housekeeper of my acquaintance gave her friends little jars of canned pie-filling for Christmas. Each jar contained just enough filling for one pie. Some jars contained prepared pumpkin, others mince-meat, still others just canned sour cherries. Her card attached said "Santa Claus wants a finger in your Christmas pie."

Speaking of canned foods for Christmas gifts, any family with a pressure cooker can give most welcome gifts in cans. Who wouldn't be overjoyed by some home-canned chicken or turkey or rabbit? Home-canned mince-meat, scrapple or head cheese make useful gifts too. The pressure cooker can also do its bit toward holiday sweets. You can steam the fruit cake in the pressure cooker, if you leave the petcock open and later dry the cake off in the oven. You can also use the cooker to steam and process plum pudding in a sealed tin. Holiday puddings sterilized this way will store safely for future use.

If you are giving gifts of food, you'll find that the food that will last, that doesn't have to be eaten at once to prevent spoilage, will be most appreciated. At a time of general feasting like this, rich foods and sweets that won't keep may go to waste. Wrap your kitchen-made gifts so that they will keep in good condition yet will look attractive. Very simple wrappings, just a bright ribbon and a bit of evergreen perhaps, are often far more attractive than all kinds of expensive decorations which may look cheap and gaudy.

Monday: "The Christmas Bird."

